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FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO  
TO RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7832  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

S E C R E T CAIRO 000008

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/01/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV LE SY EG  
SUBJECT: ARAB LEAGUE LEBANON MTG: EGYPT SEEKS TO RAISE  
PRESSURE

REF: CAIRO 3562

Classified By: DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION STUART JONES  
REASONS: 1.4 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) The Arab League confirmed to us January 2 that Syria will attend the January 6 extraordinary ministerial session to be held in Cairo on Lebanon. Hisham Yousef, Chief of Staff to Arab League Secretary General Amre Moussa, had been scheduled to travel to Beirut December 31, but told us he has postponed his visit until after the January 6 meeting. He noted Lebanese media reporting of opposition criticism of his visit as an attempt to "derail French-Syrian efforts" at a compromise. However, he said that these media reports had no bearing on his decision to postpone his travel.

¶2. (C) MFA Cabinet Advisor Nazih Neggary told us January 2 that the GOE was already formulating language for the Arab League statement following the January 6 meeting. He said the GOE goal is to reach consensus on a statement calling for an immediate election with no conditions, or come as close to that as possible. The statement should make clear that Lebanon is in danger; it has been without a president for over a month, and that this is unacceptable to the Arab League. If the Arab League statement expressed support for the Lebanese majority, this would be helpful as well, because it would counter the criticism from the minority that the majority is only supported by the west. Neggary said it will be important to intensify pressure on the Syrians, but not to corner them. He expects Qatar, Algeria, Oman, and Sudan to be among those supportive of Syria.

¶3. (C) Neggary reiterated what Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit told us December 31 (reftel): that the Egyptians believe the Syrian regime will block the process in Lebanon so long as the United Nations special tribunal on the Hariri assassination is hanging over it. The Egyptians have tried to convince the Syrians to take an alternate tack - that by showing respect for the Lebanese democratic process the Syrians could perhaps gain support for leniency with respect to the tribunal. To date, however, the Syrians have not been receptive.

¶4. (S) In a separate January 2 meeting, Cabinet Advisor for Iran Mahmoud Afifi told us that Ali Larjani had boasted to FM Aboul Gheit in a January 1 meeting that Iran was "dominating" the situation in Lebanon. Afifi assessed while Syrian support was important to the opposition tactically, Iran "holds the strategic keys" to Lebanon through its ideological link with Hizballah, and that the U.N. tribunal is "Syria's issue," not Iran's. In a mid-December visit to Tehran, which Afifi joined, Egyptian Assistant Minister for Asian Affairs Hussein Drour had asked the Iranians to urge the Syrians to be pragmatic with respect to Lebanon. It was unclear whether Iran had passed the message, but in any case, the Syrian posture has not changed.

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